BLUES ON TARGET:

THE ABCs OF I-IV-V

BY ANDY ELLIS

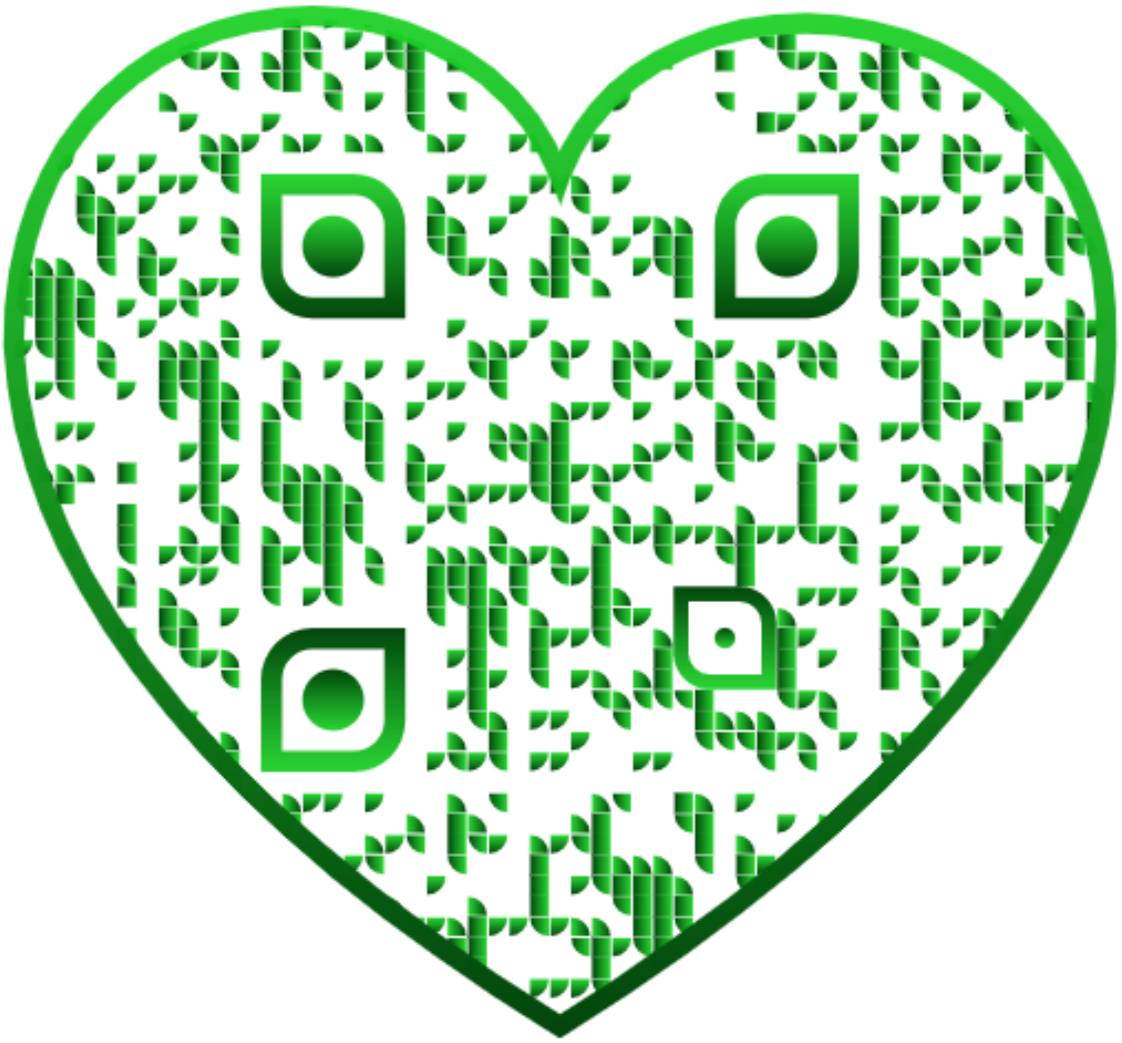
Never ask another guitarist how to solo over a I-IV-V blues progression? Nine times out of ten, you'll be admonished to practice a minor-pentatonic "box" scale. Chances are you already know one or more of these patterns—after all, most books, videos, and instructional tapes take this tack. But you can run blues scales until your fingers bleed, and you still won't sound righteous. Why?

B.B. King doesn't play scales. Albert King didn't either. Neither does Otis Rush, Hubert Sumlin, John Lee Hooker, Ry Cooder, or your local blues hero. Listen carefully to their music, and you'll hear the secret: It's *intervals*, not scale patterns, that make the magic happen. Blues vets work the space between notes, weaving in and out of the I-IV-V harmony. The concept is stunningly simple—a non-chord-tone creates tension, a chord-tone releases it—but infinitely deep.

Once you learn to hear and think in terms of harmonic color, you'll experience a radical transformation. Instead of meandering through scale patterns, wondering why your leads sound superficial and unfocused, you'll find yourself deep in the blues pocket. All that's required is a fresh perspective and a desire to explore chordal harmony.

In this lesson, we'll identify the killer chord-tones and learn how to move into and away from them with style. We'll play out of some fretboard positions that aren't obvious within scale patterns, yet are revealed by chord forms.

To help you visualize these new fingerings, we've kept all the examples in the key of *A*. This allows you to thoroughly absorb and map the interlocking moves before transposing them to other keys—something you must do gradually and persistently. We've also written this lesson's examples in 12/8. An easy time signature to read, it automatically provides a swinging three-within-



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four blues feel. Once you get into a key-of-*A*, 12/8 groove, you're there for the entire lesson.

These licks contain a wealth of information, much of which we discuss, but some of which is left for you to discover on your own. For maximum musical payoff, listen to all examples against their respective chord changes.

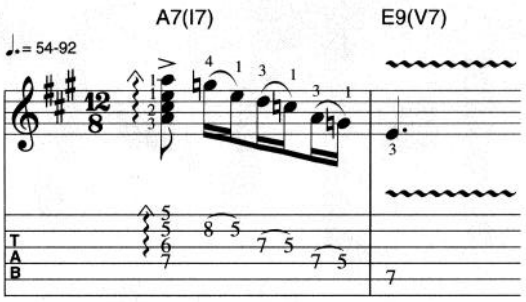
In blues, the I, IV, and V are virtually always dominant chords. Whether played as 7th, 9th, or 13th voicings, a dominant chord contains an interval called the *tritone* (see FYI sidebar). Consisting of the 3rd and ♭7th degrees, the tritone defines the dominant sound. The 3 establishes the chord as major (as opposed to minor), and the ♭7 supplies its characteristic bite. Targeting tritones is a time-honored blues and R&B technique.

Ex. 1 comprises two classic tritone licks—first to *A7* (the I7), then *D7* (the IV7). Notice how *D7*'s tritone (*F♯-C♮*) lies a half-step below *A7*'s tritone (*G♮-C♯*). Same fingering and strings. Cool, huh? That ain't all: In that one-fret shift, the notes reverse roles—*A7*'s ♭7-3 becomes *D7*'s 3-♭7. Wait, there's more: *E7*'s tritone—*G♯-D♮*, or 3-♭7—lies a half-step above *A7*'s. There's a formula here: From the I7's tritone, simply move down a fret for the IV7 or up a fret for the V7. (This drama repeats itself six frets higher—hey, that's three whole-steps—on the same strings, only this time *A7*'s tritone is the 3-♭7 type and *D7*'s and *E7*'s are ♭7-3 babies.)

Ex. 1

B.B. King popularized the chordal "rake" shown in **Ex. 2**. Five of the six subsequent notes are *Am7* chord-tones. This minor-melody-against-major-harmony sound is the essence of blues. Notice how the arpeggio leads smoothly to *E9*'s root, nailing the change. It's a Bluesbreaker lick: Eric Clapton, Peter Green, and Mick Taylor each worked variations on it.

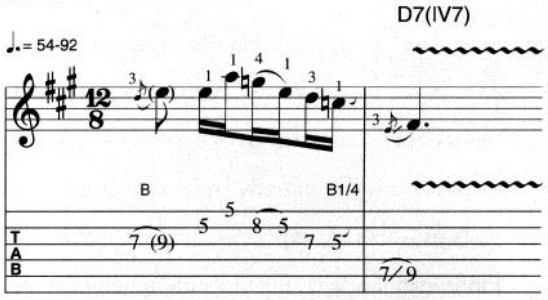
Ex. 2



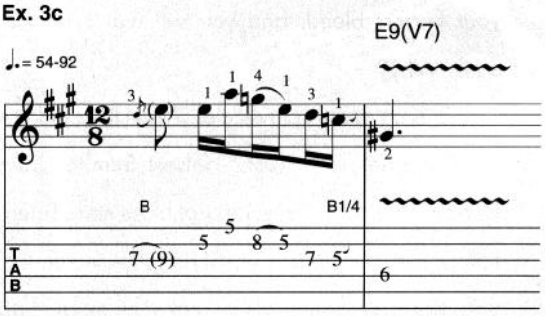
With minor adjustments, you can often tailor a lick to more than one chord. For example, graft a classic *Am7*-derived lick to *A7*, *D7*, and *E7* by targeting key chord-tones, as in **Ex. 3**. The lick resolves to *A7*'s root, *D7*'s 3rd, and *E7*'s 3rd, respectively. Pull the quarter-bend toward your feet.

Ex. 3a

Ex. 3b

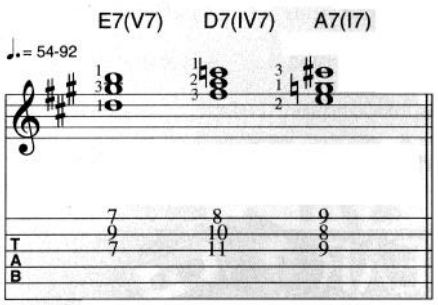


Ex. 3c

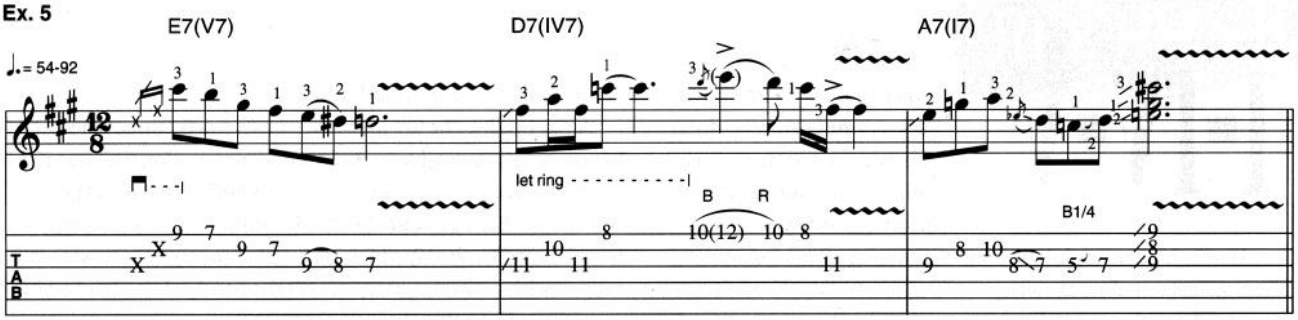


It's helpful to learn three-note dominant-chord voicings all over the fretboard and use them as focal points for developing melodic lines. Practice the *E7*, *D7*, and *A7* shapes in **Ex. 4**, and then try **Ex. 5**, a V7-IV7-I7 phrase. See how each chord shape is incorporated into its corresponding lick? The *D7* grip (bar 2, beats one and two) is particularly gnarly—Robert Johnson all the way. That

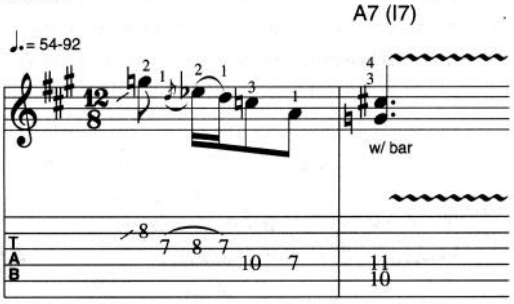
Ex. 4



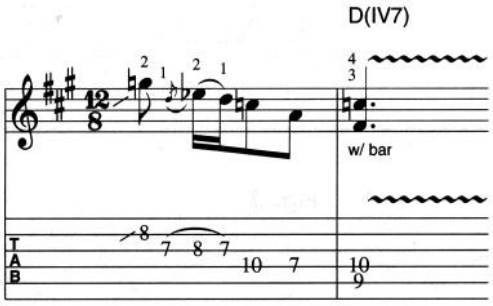
Ex. 5



Ex. 6a



Ex. 6b



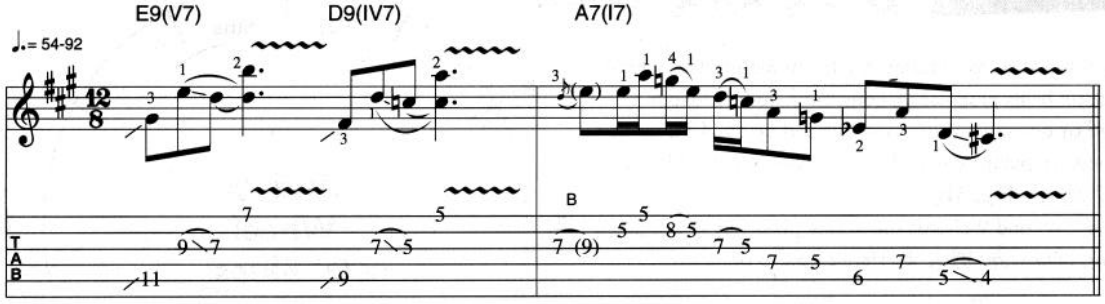
last interval jump in bar 2 is a nifty tritone shape.

Ex. 6 presents another "same lick, different application" scenario. The tags are *A7* and *D7* tritones, played this time on the fifth and fourth strings. In the key of *A*, map out the I7-IV7-V7 tritones on these strings, in both 3-♭7 and ♭7-3 configurations. Mastering tritones, especially on the inside four strings, will ratchet your playing to the next level.

Skipping strings—a handy death-to-scales tactic—gives your leads compelling contours. In **Ex. 7**, slam *E9* and *D9* with a favorite Albert King/Stevie Ray wide-interval move that *feels* as groovy as it sounds. Bar two oozes non-box-scale thinking as well. Note the diminished fifth (*E♭-A*) followed by the sly half-step slide. By contrasting large and small intervals, you maintain melodic interest.

Scale-pattern adherents would see **Ex. 8** as a run that traverses second- and fifth-position boxes. But that wouldn't do justice to the *colors* you're generating. Try another view: In bar 1, while flirting with the minor/major axis, you're dancing with an *Amaj6* arpeggio (*A-C♯-E-F♯*) and letting it lead you up the neck. In bar 2,

Ex. 7



FYI: TRITONE TWINS AND THE FLAT-FIVE SUBSTITUTION

The tritone—an interval of three whole-steps, or a diminished fifth—divides an octave in half. Inverted, this symmetrical interval remains a tritone. In a dominant 7th chord, the 3rd and ♭7th degrees form a tritone. For example, *E7*'s tritone is *G♯-D*. Invert this, and you get *D-G♯* (*A♭*), the 3rd and ♭7th of *B♭7*. Since *E7* and *B♭7* are tritone twins, you can substitute one for the other. You can swap *any* two dominants (whether dominant 7th, 9th, or 13th chords) whose roots are a diminished fifth apart. This "flat-five substitution" is a jazz mainstay. ■

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you're moving in and out of *D9*, skipping strings along the way and shifting positions to accommodate the flowing melody.

Here's another very interval-oriented strategy: Work a chromatic line against a stationary note, as in **Ex. 9**, a traditional blues turnaround. How about that *Eaug* at the end? Whammy it up—whew!

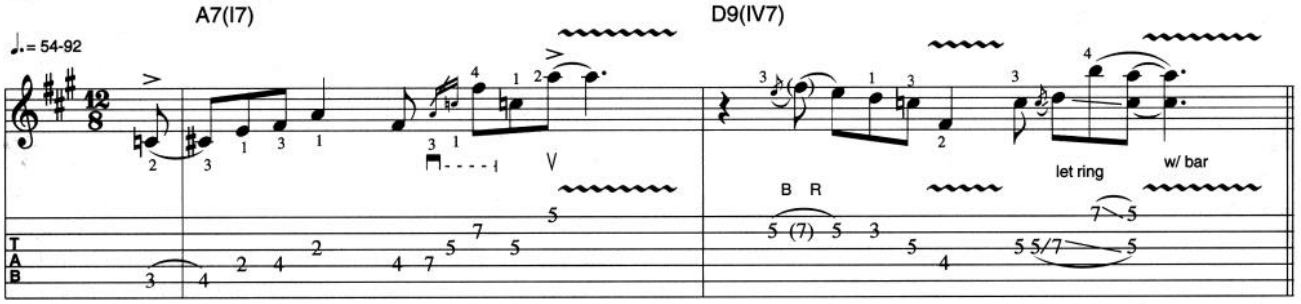
Ten of the 11 notes in **Ex. 10** are *D9* chord-tones, yet the lick is melodic and bluesy. There's no mistaking what chord you're orbiting. That's good, since in the real world, an audience doesn't take kindly to bandstand meandering.

Arpeggio city: The lick in **Ex. 11**, with its twists, turns, slides, and bends, is unpredictable and decidedly non-scalar. The last five notes—skipped-strings alert—are utterly Jimi. Watch the fingering.

By now **Ex. 12**'s ingredients should be familiar: Arpeggio-based melodies, greasy slides, pull-offs, minor/major teases—all topped with a vibratoed tritone. Hit the bend in bar 2 hard—you want the note to sing through the release.

There are two slick position shifts in **Ex. 13**. Both figures start at the 8th fret and move to the 10th to oblige a hammer/pull fest. When you release that last bend, make sure *C* sustains against

Ex. 8



12-BAR BASICS

There are 16-bar and eight-bar blues forms, but by far the most popular is the 12-bar scheme. A basic blues progression consists of the I, IV, and V chords of a key—played as dominant voicings—stretched across 12 bars as shown in **Fig. 1a**. Another popular form, called the "quick change," breaks up that initial four-bar I7 stretch (**Fig. 1b**).

Determining what the I, IV, and V chords are in any given key is a snap using the cycle of fourths/fifths chart (**Fig. 2**). Here's how to do it:

- Choose your key.
- From that note, move one note counterclockwise for the IV chord and one letter clockwise for the V.
- Make the three chords dominant—use either 7th, 9th, or 13th voicings—and you're done.

For example, let's find the three chords in, say, the key of *B♭*. From *B♭*, one counterclockwise move yields *E♭* (the IV), and one clockwise move produces *F* (the V). The I7, IV7, and V7 chords in *B♭* are *B♭7*, *E♭7*, and *F7*. ■

Fig. 2

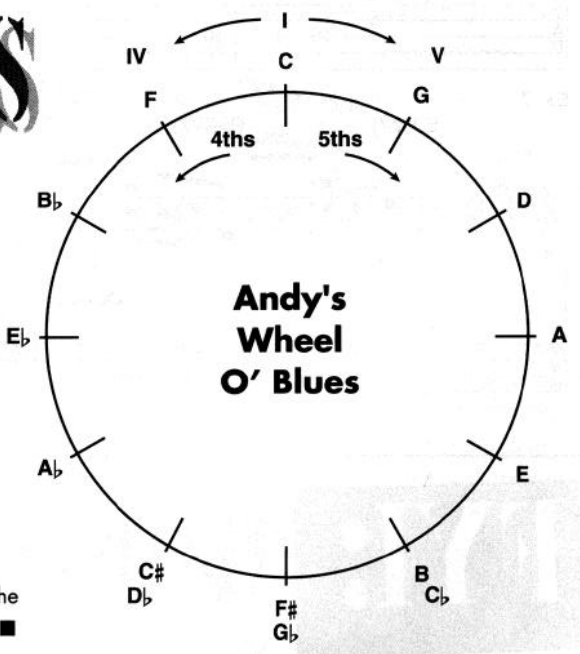
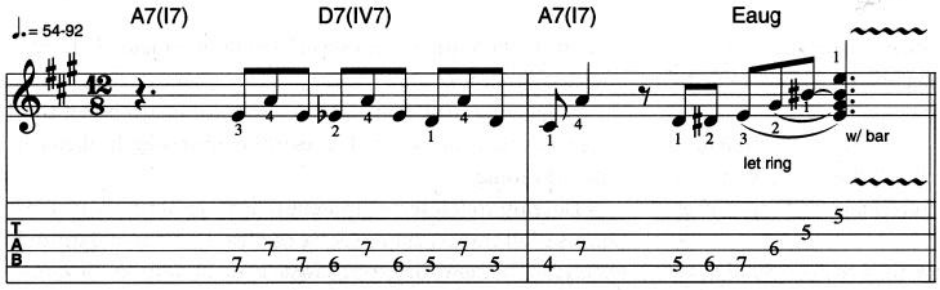


Fig. 1

bar number:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
(a) basic 12-bar:	I7	/	/	/	IV7	/	I7	/	V7	IV7	I7	V7
(b) quick change:	I7	IV7	I7	/	IV7	/	I7	/	V7	IV7	I7	V7

Ex. 9

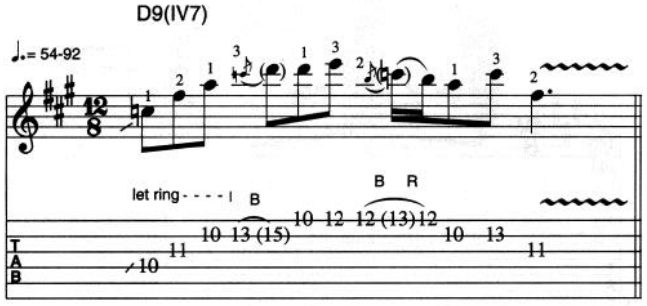


the subsequent *F♯* to create a tritone. With the right power-tube distortion, this interval wails like a banshee.

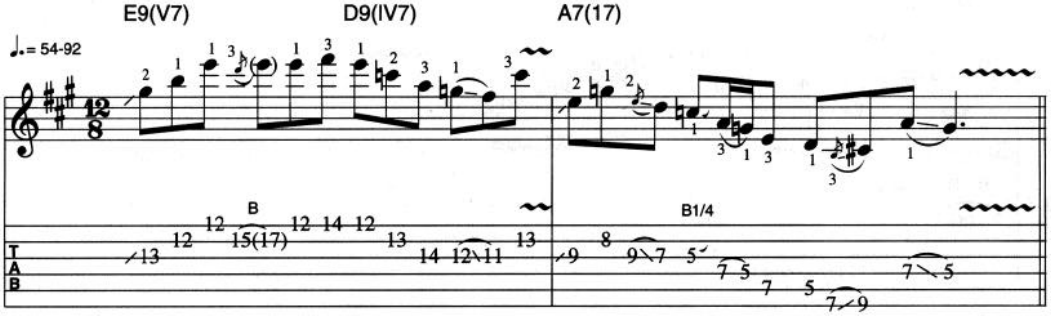
More shades o' Jimi in **Ex. 14**. He took the hammered double-stop action in beat four, previously considered a country move, and made it an essential blues-rock figure. It rubs sensually against the *E9*, don't you think? (Hendrix hung out in Nashville for a while, and it shows in "The Wind Cries Mary.")

Watch the position shift in **Ex. 15** (bar 1, beat four). This lick winds up in SRV turf. For a hip, late-'50s Blue Note sound, *à la* Kenny Burrell and Grant Green, play bar 1's I7 double-stop routine over the IV7 and V7. Simply transpose the action so you hit the chord-of-the-moment's tritone with that last slide.

Ex. 10



Ex. 11



Ex. 12

Ex. 16 features a chromatic opening, beaucoup sliding sixths, and Hendrixy double-stops. Ending at the fifth position, the lick migrates from the eighth through the fourth positions. It's fluid, melodic, and bears scant connection to scale patterns.

To explore chord-targeting concepts on your own, remember these guidelines:

• Revisit all the chords you know, listening to them one or two notes at a time (remember to audition the widest available intervals). With a clear picture of the fretboard shape in your mind, move into each chord-tone from above and below. Try approaching chord-tones from a half-step below and either a half- or a whole-step above. Then jump to them from a string or two away. Reverse the process, moving from chord-tones to other notes. When you find an intriguing way to outline a chord melodically, tie the move to your favorite licks.

• As you discover how to outline individual chords, start prac-

ticing over progressions, linking one sketch smoothly to the next.

• When you learn a new chord, don't stop with the static grip. Take time to explore single- and double-note approaches and exits to the harmony.

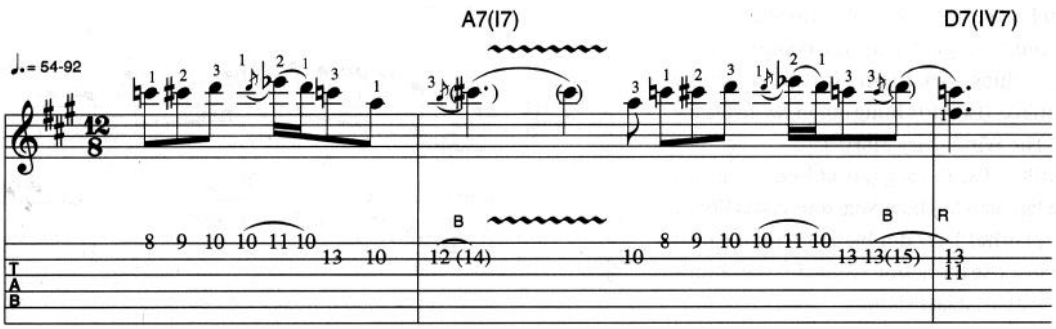
• Brush up on chord theory. Learn how the four basic chord types are constructed (major, minor, augmented, diminished) and how to convert these triads into seventh chords, extended chords, and altered chords.

• Sing along with your lines. It's another magic bullet that enhances your melodic sensibilities while subverting the dreaded scale syndrome.

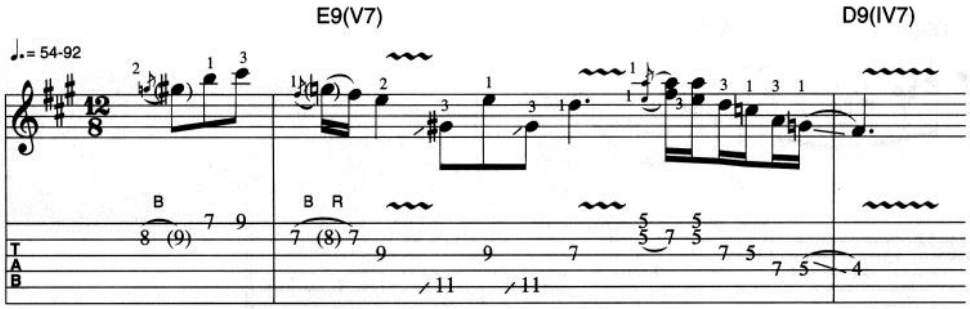
• Develop your interval awareness by listening to great blues players of all eras. As guitarists, we can learn a lot from harp and sax players, because they don't have to contend with box patterns.

• Above all, learn to follow your ears, not your fingers. ■

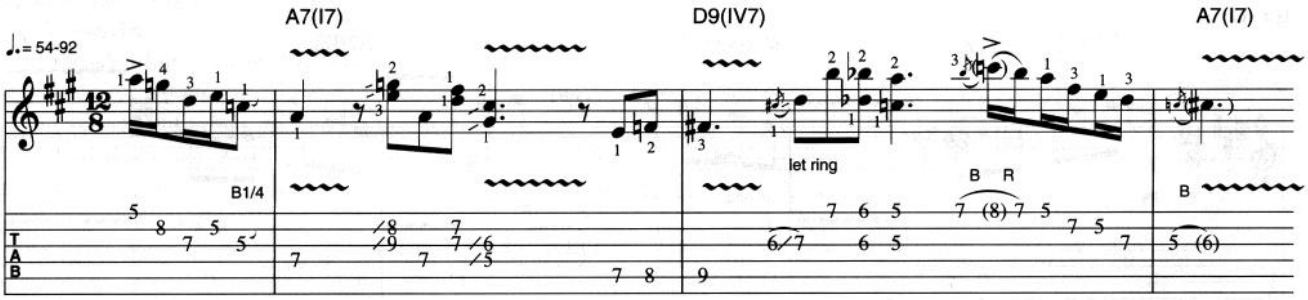
Ex. 13



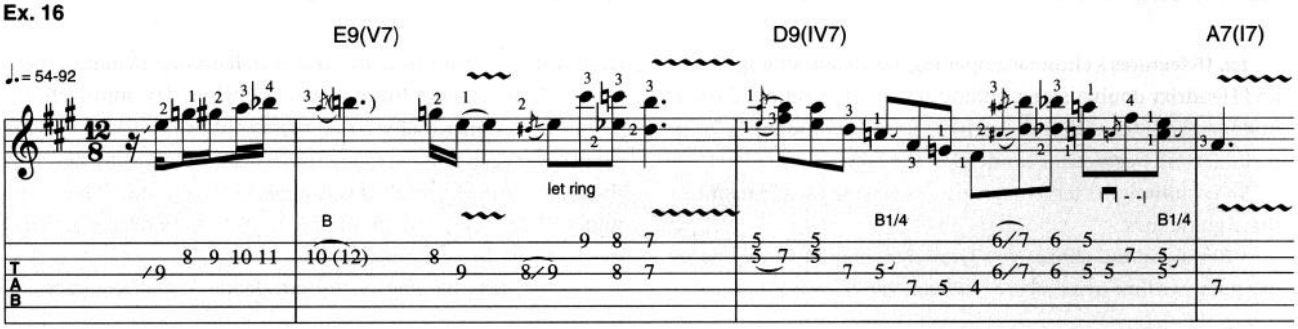
Ex. 14



Ex. 15

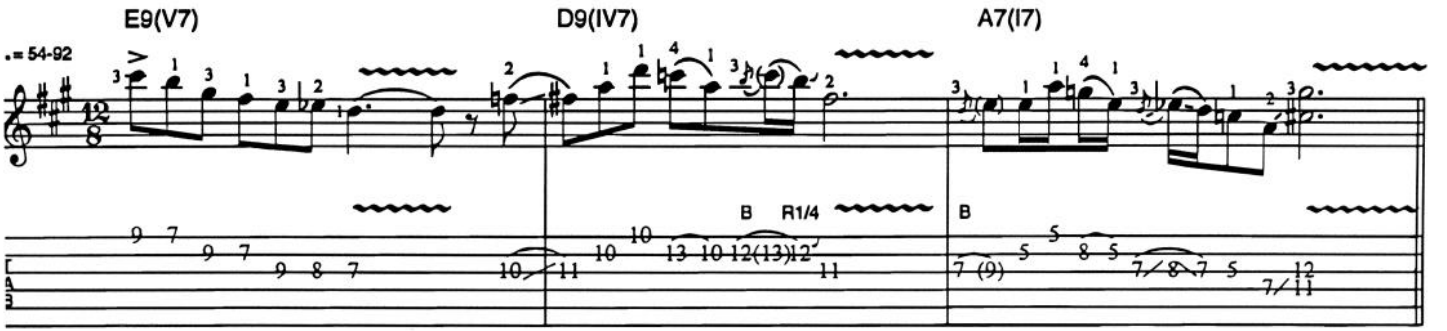


Ex. 16



Please note the following correction:

How to Play Blues
Page 11, lesson 1, "Blues on Target: The ABCs of I-IV-V", by Andy Ellis | example 12



The NOTES ON CALL audio version is correct.